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ABSTRACT

Only a longitudinal study, in which retrospective reports can be verified against data collected earlier, can determine what topics tend to be reported accurately and whether certain types of individuals are more likely to be accurate reporters. A representative group of adults (N=60) who became parents 50 years ago are now part of the oldest and longest continuing longitudinal study of adulthood and aging. Subjects were first interviewed at mean age 29 and again at ages 47 and 69. Subjects at follow-up interviews described what they presently enjoyed and reminisced about what they had enjoyed in the past. All respondents were more likely to describe things that were enjoyed than things not enjoyed at both interviews. As middle-aged adults, women were more likely to mention husbands, while the men reported on careers and hobbies. As young-older adults, women were more likely to mention friends and children, and men were more likely to recall their careers. Subjects also demonstrated consistency over time. Although accuracy is questionable in retrospective reports, the findings suggest that reminiscence gives a fairly clear picture of past areas of enjoyment. (Author/NRB)

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THAT'S WHAT WE ENJOYED IN THE OLD DAYS:
RETROSPECTIVE REPORTS

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That's What We Enjoyed in the Old Days:

Retrospective Reports

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A rare opportunity to examine the accuracy of aging persons' recollections of events that took place earlier in their lives is reported in this paper. Theories of personality development have relied heavily on retrospective reports for evidence of the influence of earlier events on later personality characteristics. From the time of Freud, retrospective reports have provided much of the substance in studies concerned with the role of early experience and parental functioning in personality development. Similarly, theorists of aging have necessarily placed considerable faith in data collected from old people through recollections and reminiscence. Yet we know very little about how much can be observed by the recollector/informant, or how much can be retained, or how it will be reported.

In view of the burgeoning of interest in aging and the fact that most research will of necessity be cross-sectional, it is crucial to determine the interpretability of retrospective reports. Only a longitudinal study, in which the retrospective reports can be verified against data collected at earlier times, can determine the accuracy of these reports.

There have been few studies of retrospective reports from persons of any age (for a review, see Field, 1979). Most of these have examined mothers'

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reports of events in the early lives of their children (Douglas & Blomfield, 1956; Pyles, Stolz, & Macfarlane, 1935; Yarrow, Campbell, & Burton, 1970) or the reports of young adults who were subjects of longitudinal studies (Cherry & Rodgers, 1979; Livson & McNeill, 1962; Weishaus, 1980). The only studies that have been able to investigate the recall of older persons have examined memory for public events (Squire, 1974), public faces (Warrington & Sanders, 1971) objects in common use (Poon & Fozard, 1978), or events of limited personal significance (Baddeley, Lewis, & Nimmo-Smith, 1979; Gekoski & Kerrigan, 1980). In spite of the obvious importance of the question, I have found no other studies that have investigated the veridical nature of reports by elderly people of personal events occurring in their own lives.

Reminiscence has long been considered an important part of the aging process, a crucial aspect of coming to terms with one's own life (Butler, 1963). An integral part of reminiscence is the recollection and recounting of aspects of one's life that have been enjoyable and also those aspects that have not been enjoyed. In most investigations it is not possible to determine the accuracy of these reports of past areas of enjoyment, for prior data confirming the reports have not been available. It is fortunate that there is a longitudinal study of middle aged and elderly people that includes such comprehensive information that reminiscence about earlier enjoyment can be verified.

Method

Subjects

The subjects are a representative sample of a group of young adults who became parents of babies in Berkeley, California, more than 50 years ago (Macfarlane, 1938). These babies became the subjects of the famous Guidance Study at the Institute of Human Development, University of California, Berkeley, and their contribution to our understanding of child development is

incalculable, and immense (Jones et al, 1971). The parents of the Guidance Study babies, originally studied only for their influence on their children, have recently come to be seen as subjects of great interest in their own right (Field, 1981a; Kuypers, 1974; Maas & Kuypers, 1974; Mussen et al, 1980), and are now recognized as part of the oldest and longest continuing longitudinal study of adulthood and aging.

These adults were interviewed intensively when their children became part of the Guidance Study, and they themselves were young adults (YA), in 1928-1929; again when they were middle aged (MA) and their children were 17 years old, in 1946-1947; and when their children were 40, and they were young-old (YO), in 1968-1969.

This report concerns all parents for whom we have complete data at all three time periods: 44 women and 16 men. These survivors were on average 69 years old at the time of the last follow-up, with a range of 58 to 80. Although they are a favored group in some ways, they still are broadly representative of surviving persons of their age: every educational level is represented, from less than eight years of education to graduate degrees; as is every occupational level, from unskilled laborers to high professionals. All of the group still live in California, and 80% are within a one-hour drive of the city where their children were born more than 50 years ago -- a stable population. Their average IQ at age 69 was 119, normally distributed around this high mean.

Interview Methods and Analysis

Near the beginning of the YO interview participants were asked about what they enjoy doing "these days". Approximately three hours later in the interview they were asked to think back to the past: to the time they were in their 40s: "What was life like for you then?" Among the questions asked about this period of their lives was what they had enjoyed at that time, and

they were asked what they had not enjoyed, as well. Later the participants were asked to think back even farther, to the time they were in their 20s, and to reminisce about that. Questions again included those about what things had been enjoyed, and not enjoyed, during those early years.

Similarly, as part of the MA interview participants described what they presently enjoyed and did not enjoy, and one to two hours later in the interview they reminisced about the time of their 20s and what they had enjoyed and not enjoyed at that time. No contemporary data were gathered in YA about what was or was not enjoyed at that time.

The questions were informal and open-ended, and no probes were made. Responses may be quite different than would have been elicited by direct questions or check-lists. It is all the more interesting to observe systematic differences over time in these circumstances.

Because of the difference in data collection methods in 1945-1947, before the era of the tape recorder, and in 1968-1969, there is more missing data in the MA interview, particularly in the area of things not enjoyed. In addition, the stringent coding rules used in this study of the accuracy of retrospective reports required that only those areas for which evidence was quite clear were coded. As a consequence, the problem of missing data is acute. In all analyses only those respondents are used who have complete data at that comparison. Men's and women's responses are examined separately in all cases.

Table 1 shows the categories in which the responses fell, arranged in order of frequency of occurrence. Several other categories were coded but seldom occurred: "death of family member or friend" (3 instances), "other" (4), "nothing was enjoyed then" (1). Others were unanalyzable: "everything was just fine", miscellaneous noncodable responses.

Results

Inconsistencies in Reports

Preliminary analyses found apparent inconsistencies in responses in the same interview by seven participants. Going back to the original transcripts, however, it was found that there were no cases of true inconsistency. Rather, different specific subjects had been cited within the categories. For example, one man enjoyed his job but hated commuting, one woman enjoyed one of her children but was much worried about another, or one woman loved being a music teacher but disliked the occupation which secured the bulk of her income.

Close examination was also made of the transcripts of ten subjects for whom it appeared that there were over-time discrepancies. Once again, with one exception these were caused by reference to two different aspects of the same category. For example, one woman reported trouble with the in-laws who lived next door, while later she recalled enjoying the company of her sister; another woman was reporting about her first husband in one interview and about the second husband in the other. In only one case was there a clear disagreement over time: a woman with a whole litany of resentments toward her husband in MA reported in YO "I thought the sun rose and set on him: he could do no wrong".

On the other hand, a much milder form of inconsistency was found. Sometimes, when asked what they had not enjoyed at the earlier time, participants answered, for example, "Oh nothing: everything was just fine", or "I cannot remember that there was anything I didn't enjoy then". In 12 cases (10% of the respondents in both interviews), however, the respondents who asserted that "everything was just fine" had reported at the earlier time one or more categories that were not enjoyed.

There was only one instance of the opposite: one woman who reported in MA that everything was just fine recalled in YO that she had not enjoyed her financial status or her own siblings during middle age.

Positivity

All respondents were more likely to describe things that were enjoyed than things not enjoyed at both interviews. For the women, responses were 55% positive in the MA interview and 61% positive in YO. The men were more positive than the women in both interviews: 62% in MA and 66% in YO. Describing their young adulthood, the women were significantly more positive in their recall at YO than they were at MA (sign test, $p = .011$, one-tailed). Other comparisons -- women's reports of things enjoyed in MA and men's reports both of YA and MA -- were in the predicted direction, but the change over time did not reach significance.

What People Recalled

Table 1 shows the categories that are being analyzed. The first seven categories for the women and first five for the men were much more frequently mentioned than the remaining categories.

In YO men were significantly different from women in the numbers of responses given that mentioned friends, children, and careers. Women were more likely to mention friends ($\chi^2_1 = 4.31$, $p < .05$) and children ($\chi^2_1 = 4.90$, $p < .05$), and men were more likely to recall their careers ($\chi^2_1 = 8.21$, $p < .01$). In MA, significant differences were found for mentions of spouse, hobbies, and careers. At that time, women were more likely to mention husbands ($\chi^2_1 = 9.32$, $p < .005$) while the men reported on careers ($\chi^2_1 = 4.38$, $p < .05$) and hobbies ($\chi^2_1 = 11.82$, $p < .005$).

Although women were more likely to mention their spouses than men were, the men's reports were all positive: they recalled enjoying their wives. The women, on the other hand, reported both enjoyment and nonenjoyment

of their husbands. In MA, in fact, 56% of all mentions of husbands were negative.

Each category was examined separately for shift over time in the number of mentions, using McNemar's significance of shift test. Both men ($\chi^2_1 = 5.14, p < .025$) and women ($\chi^2_1 = 6.72, p < .005$) mentioned career more often in the MA interview than they did in their retirement years. In addition, women were more likely ($\chi^2_1 = 4.08, p < .025$) to mention the home in MA and much more likely ($\chi^2_1 = 25.04, p < .001$) to cite hobbies as a source of enjoyment when they were elderly. No other changes over time approached significance.

Congruence over Time: Repetition of Recollections

The responses were examined for consistency over time. How many people reported the same areas of enjoyment more than once?

Of all responses given by the men, 50% were reported at both times. In other words, if a middle-aged man recalled having enjoyed his job during YA, then the job was likely to be recalled as a source of early adulthood enjoyment when he was elderly, as well. Of the women's responses, 41% were repeated over time. The two interviews did not differ in the number of repetitions elicited. Twice as many positive as negative repetitions of recall were found overall. Once again, women were more likely to be negative than were men.

Influence of Present Enjoyment on Retrospective Reports

It is interesting to examine the possible influence of the present on the participant's recollection of past enjoyments. First, it must be emphasized that questions about present enjoyments and those 17, 23, or 40 years earlier were contained in parts of the interview that were separated by approximately 1½ or 3 hours of interview time. Furthermore, the questions about past enjoyment were embedded in reminiscence about "what was life like

for you then?" Recollections were unlikely to be influenced by the content of the interview.

Table 2 shows that a large percentage of the things remembered as enjoyed were the same categories as the things that were contemporaneously enjoyed. For women 40% of all responses at MA about the present and about YA were in concordance; 50% of the responses in YO about the present and about MA were in concordance; 47% of responses at YO were in concordance with reports about YA. The comparable reports for the men were 53%, 53%, and 34%. The middle-aged women's reports of things not enjoyed in MA and in YA reached concordance of 39%, almost as many negative as positive items were repeated over time. Too few of the men's responses were available to be analyzed.

In addition, the opposite was examined: how often did a person report that he/she had enjoyed earlier something that was described as not enjoyed at present? It was quite possible, of course, that one's interests or circumstances could change sufficiently in 17, 23, or 40 years that something that had been much enjoyed at one time would be viewed in a contrary way at the later time. Table 2 shows that this did happen when the participants were in young-old age, but not in middle-age. For the women, 10% of the reports comparing YO and YA, a span of 40 years, and 17% of the reports comparing YO and MA, over 23 years, reflected this changed assessment of activities enjoyed. The comparable percents were 7% and 8% for the men. There was no discernable pattern to these changes.

A final analysis examined the retrospective reports of middle-aged enjoyment. Were these more often congruent with the earlier MA report of present enjoyment, or were they more likely to be congruent with the YO statement of what is enjoyed these days? In the latter case, present circumstances are affecting the content of the recollections; in the former, recall appears to be the predominant factor. (There were also cases where all three reports

were congruent as well as some where there was no repetition, but these were not included in this analysis.) For the women, present circumstances are somewhat more closely associated with recollections of the past than are the areas of enjoyment that were reported at the earlier period, for 58% of the reports were congruent with YO enjoyment, sign test, $z = 1.17$, $p < .12$, one-tailed. The men's reports tended toward recall, but this was far from reliable.

Discussion

Earlier papers have examined the changing reports of childhood happiness (Field, 1980), the role—or lack of role—of personality characteristics in accuracy of recall (Field & Honzik, 1981), and recollections of aging spouses of events they shared in common over the years (Field, 1981b). These papers utilized direct answers to directly-put questions or ratings by skilled coders, based on reading of the entire interview.

The data described in this paper are weaker in some ways, because of the information that was never gathered and because of the quality of reminiscence that is inherent in the questions about enjoyment. The answers that emerged were not elicited by cues or by probes, and as a result there is a validity that is peculiar to them. These were the topics that were at the "top of the mind" of each respondent. Because this sort of reminiscence is common in many studies of aging persons and because of the persuasive validity of the materials available here, the study seems worth doing.

A reassuring amount of consistency over time has been found for this representative group of adults. Previous work (Field, 1981a) showed considerable inaccuracy over time, so it is surprising to find so much consistency in areas of reported enjoyment. Rankings stayed much the same in both interviews, with only 15% of the categories showing significant shifts over time. Outright repetition of categories was extensive, and people did not reverse their per-

ceptions in recall. Perhaps the quality of reminiscence enhances this consistency: the respondent may feel less emotional involvement in the question about enjoyment and thus find this part of the interview less stressful than the earlier questions about family, work, home, and past relationships.

The mild discrepancies found, when "everything was just fine" supplanted the earlier enumeration of things not enjoyed, suggest that time may have provided some easing of memories of unpleasant experiences. This would be consistent with the findings of other investigators that things looked better in retrospect (Pyles et al, 1935; Yarrow et al, 1970).

Earlier in this investigation it was found that about half of the topics reported over time were more negatively assessed when the respondents were middle aged than when they were young adults or were elderly. These topics included such factual variables as father's education or spouse's occupation in YA as well as attitudinal reports such as happiness of childhood or financial strain in YA (Field, 1980, 1981a). Accordingly, it was expected that the YO retrospections would be more optimistic than those of MA, and this was indeed the case, reliably so for the reports of the women about their young adulthood.

It is interesting that there were no cases of citing as enjoyed at one period something that was not enjoyed in the other, when comparisons of YA and MA were made. This was not the case in the YO-YA or YO-MA comparisons, when 7% to 17% of mentions were in the reverse direction. Since it was shown that true inconsistencies were very rare in this group of people, it must be assumed that these differences reflect real changes in enjoyment in the older years. Not surprisingly, areas of enjoyment changed much less in the 17 years between the YA and MA interviews, when the participants continued to be engaged in child rearing, home making, and careers, than between middle age and the time of retirement.

An earlier study found that the present relationship with one's child was more closely associated with one's retrospective reports of the relationship with the child at the earlier time than was the actual earlier relationship (Field, 1981b). It was hypothesized that a similar effect would be found in the area of enjoyment. There was a trend in this direction for the women, for repetitions of mentions occurred more often with present enjoyment and reports about the past than they did with reports and the earlier statements. The lesser reliability in this study may be a function of the different data base: the canonical correlations of the relationship analysis were based on three broad ratings, whereas here it is the "top of the mind" response that is being evaluated.

This study can be useful to other, cross-sectional studies of reminiscence and life review by showing that although accuracy is questionable in retrospective reports, it appears that reminiscence does give a fairly clear picture of past areas of enjoyment.

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Table 1

Categories of Enjoyed and Not-Enjoyed Responses
 Arranged in the Order of Frequency of Mention

<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>
Children-Family	Job-Career
Hobbies	Hobbies
Job-Career	Children-Family
Spouse	Home
Home	Friends
Business, Social Organizations	Spouse
Friends	Finance
Travel	Business, Social Organizations
Finance	Travel
Health	Health

Table 2

Repetition of Reports of Enjoyment
and Lack of Enjoyment at Each Time Comparison

	Concordant Reports		Nonconcordant Reports	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
<u>Reports of Enjoyment</u>				
YA - MA	40%	53%	0%	0%
YA - YO	50	53	10	7
MA - YO	47	34	17	8
<u>Reports of Not Enjoying</u>				
YA - MA	39	NA	0	0